

Chapter Eleven

THE HOME FELLOWSHIP PROMOTING RIGHTEOUSNESS



“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46,47).

“Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia” (Romans 16:5).

“The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house”
(1 Corinthians 16:19).

“To Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home” (Philemon 2).

“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house” (Colossians 4:15).

The above verses make clear that Paul was writing these particular letters to the *ekklesia*, the “called-out ones” who met in homes. As noted earlier, many of the early Church practices duplicated those of the God-fearing synagogues at the time of Christ. Like their synagogue birthplace the early Hebraic home churches (or neighborhood home fellowships, as we are calling them) retained the characteristic of *personal participation*. The earliest believers experienced the neighborhood home fellowship as an *extension of the home* for spiritual growth.

The preceding verses also reflect early Church *koinonia*, the fellowship and caring interaction that developed among those in the churches that met in homes. At the time of Christ the home signified the spiritual training base for the Jewish family, the place where parents shouldered the responsibility for training up their children in the wisdom and will of the Lord. The home fellowship represented an extension of the home, not a programmed activity of a larger congregation that met at the temple. This is an important distinction, one that is vital if you are to understand the significance of the progression outward from relationship with Jesus to spiritual growth in the home to intimacy with fellow load-bearers to gatherings of worshipers in congregations at large.

Authors’ Note: We were once interviewed to head up a new home fellowship ministry for a large congregation. During the interview we found that we could not communicate clearly with the interviewer. He was looking for programs and activities to occupy and coordinate the congregation as they met in contrived “care groups.” In effect, he wanted a “Christian program” that would guide and instruct group attendees so that there would be standardized, predictable outcomes. Our emphasis on personal righteousness and load-bearing relationships built on an individual’s trust in Jesus actually seemed intimidating to him.

A church leader from another denomination once told us, “We can’t have our people trusting Jesus. That would cause *mayhem*! We need to control and direct the spiritual activities of the people in our congregation.” Do trust in God and obedience to Him *really* produce mayhem? “*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace*” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

“An Intimate Few”, or *Neighborhood Home Fellowships*, are also called care groups, cell groups, or home churches. Regardless of the terminology, in the early Church they represented a *seven-day-a-week commitment* of the followers of Jesus to one another. As an extension of the home, the neighborhood home fellowship was the relational network that upheld personal righteousness. Keep in mind this distinction as you read this chapter. In many churches today “care groups” are viewed as scheduled meetings of small groups of believers whose interest is primarily on “self.” The focus of the early Church was twofold: *righteous, load-bearing fellowship* that equipped followers of Jesus for *godly living* and *Gospel sharing*.

Remember, the goal of your pilgrimage with Jesus is a personal relationship that draws you to increasingly *trust* the Lord and to *bear fruit* for Him. True ministry within a home fellowship equips followers of Christ to share their trust in the only true Source of life and provision. Authentic fellowship finds load-bearing believers encouraging each other as they wholeheartedly trust God. Authentic ministry comes as one Christ-follower helps another to lovingly trust the Lord in all circumstances. Paul understood that as believers followed Jesus, the Lord would allow them to encounter difficult situations “so

that we might not rely on ourselves but on God” (2 Corinthians 1:9). It is God Who prompts His people to reach out beyond themselves to come alongside the needy and minister His mercy to them.

Such availability and vulnerability requires deprogramming from the institutional approach that is so embedded in a broad area of church culture today. If you are ever to experience the love, understanding, and acceptance that God is restoring to His people, you must, by His grace, get past the depersonalized forms of associations to which you may have grown accustomed. For those who have been part of congregations that rely heavily on programmed activities designed only to benefit the participant, it often takes several months to adapt to the increased personal responsibilities of a home fellowship built upon the early Church model.

“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Early Church believers approached God to worship Him and to have their prayers *answered*. This may sound like a small point, but think about it. It wasn't just the act of praying, but *answered prayer*, that got the early Church noticed. The book of Acts begins with a small band of disciples: *“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14)*. When Peter and John were released from the Sanhedrin's capture (see Acts 4), they went directly to their fellow believers: *“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31)*. When these people prayed, something happened. Miraculous answers to prayer abounded as they trusted wholeheartedly in the One to Whom they prayed. Peter's miraculous release from prison (see Acts 12) further confirmed to them that prayer moved God to respond.

Think about Paul and his numerous requests for prayer: *“Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17); “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18); “With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11)*. Paul wasn't asking that mere words be lifted to God. He was earnestly seeking the response that God would give in answer to those prayers.

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

Because of their knowledge of God from the Hebrew Bible, the early Church understood God's conditions for answering the prayers of His people. The book of James contains many Hebraic themes identified with the early Church: a trusting faith that results in action; concern for the poor and underprivileged; humility versus haughtiness. Apperceiving Proverbs 15:29, *“The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer*

of the righteous,” James reemphasizes God’s prerequisite for answered prayer. That prerequisite is righteousness.

*“Therefore **confess your sins** to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a **righteous** man is **powerful and effective**. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (James 5:16-18, emphasis added).*

Addressing the prayers of Jesus, Hebrews 5:8 states: *“He was heard because of his **godliness** [righteousness]”*(emphasis added). Again the writer of Hebrews emphasizes the importance of righteousness: *“Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the **teaching about righteousness**. But solid food is for the **mature**, who by **constant use** have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil”* (Hebrews 5:13,14, emphasis added).

Because of the *communal* as well as personal awareness of the Hebraic early Church, the followers of Jesus were deeply concerned with individual and communal righteousness. The Hebrew Scriptures had demonstrated that God had prevented the entire nation of Israel from conquering the city of Ai because of the hidden sin of one man, Achan (see Joshua 7). God had upheld this same standard of righteousness for the fledgling Church by taking the lives of Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:1-11).

The Lord’s Supper, based on the Jewish Passover observance, required all leaven to be removed from the land. The removal of the leaven signified a state of holiness (righteousness). Jesus and His disciples could not keep the Passover unless all leaven, or spiritual impurity, had first been swept away. Paul elaborates on the state of righteousness required of those partaking of communion:

*“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be **guilty** of sinning against the **body and blood of the Lord**. A man ought to **examine himself** before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we **judged ourselves**, we would not come under judgment”* (1 Corinthians 11:23-31, emphasis added).

Partaking of communion in the early Church was a serious communal activity. The early Jewish believers understood the holiness of the Passover and believed Jesus’s words, *“This is my body”; “This is my blood.”* Plato’s dualism that separated the sanctity of spirit and matter had not yet influenced the Church. Therefore, the philosophical argu-

ment over the communion elements (transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or spiritual remembrance) so dividing denominations today did not divide the true believers. Hebraic block logic, bolstered by trust, accepted the words of Jesus without further explanation. Jesus was the sinless Son of God. His fulfillment of prophetic Scripture as the sacrificial Lamb could in no way violate God's command to abstain from blood consumption. Thus, Jesus could assure His disciples, *"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life"* (John 6:63). The faith of the Twelve could accept His words even while the mental struggle of other disciples caused them to turn back and desert Him (see John 6:60-68).

Some research of the early Church supports that the followers of Jesus got together in homes for the specific purpose of sharing communion. This encompassed a time of participation and an opportunity for repentance. Later, when communion took on a sacramental nature, participation was incorporated into the congregational gathering on the Sabbath. A very important personal and communal *scrutiny* element of the early Church was thus lost. Where sins were confessed and righteousness prevailed, prayers were answered in a powerful way. These were "God-size" answers. When sins remain unconfessed, prayer becomes form without power.

Paramount in any of the early Church practices was fellowship with God. Without a right relationship with Him there is no other fellowship: *"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ"* (1 John 1:3). A merciful and gracious God provided the means to restore fellowship and righteousness that had been broken by sin: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

The breaking of bread in the home was critical not only to maintain strong relationships but to preserve righteousness. Home gatherings provided a medium for accountability so that the Lord's instruction for dealing with a person who sins could be followed.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:15-20).

The primary goal of the above passage is maintenance of individual and communal righteousness, and restoration of the repentant. God knows man's frail inability to always maintain His standard of righteousness. Even King David, a man after God's own heart, was an adulterer and murderer. In order to restore fellowship the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke him. David, his heart broken and contrite before his God, repented and confessed his sin. His intimacy with God was restored.

For the home fellowship of today, confession and repentance are key to maintaining ongoing prayer that results in divine answers. Recall that to be “born again” in the early Church meant that you put full trust and reliance in Jesus Christ. Followers of Christ covenanted to enter into a Lord / slave-servant relationship. The foundation of this relationship was mutual love that carried with it a certain responsibility. The *Lordship* of Jesus necessitated obedience from His servant. Lack of trust, unlovingness, or disobedience by the servant was sin, a breaking of fellowship with God. Confession recognized that sin had indeed occurred. God was seeking a repentance that sorrowed over the separation of intimacy with Him. This sorrow produced repentance that turned away from evil and toward God: *“Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your **sorrow led you to repentance**. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. **Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death**”* (2 Corinthians 7:9-10, emphasis added).

Over the centuries the church has acquiesced to a sinner’s confession that an offensive act has been committed. Such admittance is cognitive and deals judicially with the unlawful act. In effect, the perpetrator is focused only on the wrong action, not on the person or the relationship that was violated. This reasoning is incomplete. The Hebraic early Church was relational, not cognitive. Repentance required taking responsibility for damage done to the relationship as well as restitution for the offense. Note the difference of emphasis from focus on “the hurtful action” to concern with “who was hurt by the action.” Since the reality of being born again was a loving trust in God, the severity of personal sin was all the more poignant—the sin violated Someone with whom the offender had enjoyed a loving and trusting relationship.

Atonement for sin could be made only through the shedding of blood (see Hebrews 9:22). Because of their knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish people recognized the futility of atonement by human effort. Forgiveness required the grace of God, that He would accept the substitutionary atonement of the annual sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. How well Jewish believers understood the importance of the shed blood of Jesus to fulfill the just requirement of their holy God!

The Hebrew Scriptures clearly established that God could not be approached in just any manner without severe consequences. Even the high priest who represented the entire Jewish nation could enter the holy of holies only once a year after the sprinkling of blood. Jesus shared the parable of the wedding banquet to describe the kingdom of God (see Matthew 22:1-14). He told His listeners that some people outrightly resist the King’s offer; others even kill His messengers. Some accept His invitation but fail to prepare themselves to enter His presence:

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matthew 22:11-13).

Early believers recognized that even earthly kings had standards for entry into

their presence. Esther understood this when Mordecai implored her to approach her husband, King Xerxes, on behalf of the Jews about to be annihilated:

All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king (Esther 4:11).

Consider the above condition of approach to the king as you read Hebrews 4:16: *“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”* Standing alone, this verse could seem to indicate that believers may approach the throne even if filled with unrepentant sin. The early Church clearly understood such presumption to be false. The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes the necessary prerequisite of the shed blood of Jesus:

*He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption...How much more, then, will the **blood of Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, **cleanse our consciences** from acts that lead to death, so that **we may serve the living God!** (Hebrews 9:12,14, emphasis added).*

It is not through our righteousness that our prayers are heard by God. It is because of our humble reliance on the shed blood of Jesus to cover our sins that we receive forgiveness from Him as we confess and repent. The humble and contrite person who trembles at God's word and trusts Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength is the one esteemed by God (see Isaiah 66:3).

Prayer in the early Church included spiritual warfare. The example of Daniel from the Hebrew Bible demonstrated that persevering prayer and trust in a loving Father were key to God's response. Demonic forces opposed the ministering angels who brought God's answer (see Daniel 10; Hebrews 1:14). Righteous Daniel prayed for twenty-one days before the heavenly messenger, with the help of the archangel Michael, broke through with God's response. Jesus voiced the parable of the persistent widow (see Luke 18:1-8) to encourage His followers to pray without ceasing: *“And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?”* (Luke 18:7).

Satan is aware of the importance of righteousness combined with prayer that perseveres until the answer is received. If he cannot hinder through unconfessed sin, he will discourage God's people from praying by instilling doubt and unbelief that the Lord will ever answer. This is why the intimate righteousness of the home fellowship is critical to encourage each other to persist in prayer. A home fellowship of today that does not experience God-sized answers to their prayers may have already given way to Satan's scheme. [See also *The Restoration of Spiritual Gifts* by Mike and Sue Dowgiewicz.¹ This booklet discusses the coordinated use of spiritual gifts as weapons of warfare in faith communities.]

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24,25).

The home fellowships of the early Church encouraged participation in communion through the mutual upholding of biblical standards. The home gatherings represented the location in which individuals were included or excluded from fellowship. It would have been unthinkable for a person to join a home fellowship for purely social reasons as do many believers today. The Bible has established criteria for God’s people to have fellowship with each other. The Word also establishes a precedent that men and women are influenced for good or for evil by the close relationships they keep.

Study the following verses:

“He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20).

“A violent man entices his neighbor and leads him down a path that is not good” (Proverbs 16:29).

“Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared” (Proverbs 22:24).

“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him” (Titus 3:10).

The right to separate from evildoers in order to uphold righteous standards is a biblical prerogative. Paul emphasized the importance of communal righteousness in the Church in his admonishment to the Corinthians: *“When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 5:4,5).

Author’s Note: Because of the dualism so prevalent in the church today, it is difficult for many to believe that God would actually use Satan to perfect His people. The Scriptures demonstrate that God used Satan to test Job (see Job 1:6-2:10) and to sift Peter (Luke 22:31). God also uses him in the church to destroy the sin nature in His people when all other human elements fail. That is why Paul writes about believers who live close to the fringe of righteousness but still make it to heaven: *“He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames”* (1 Corinthians 3:15).

*“The wicked man flees though no one pursues,
but the righteous are as bold as a lion” (Proverbs 28:1).*

Consider the importance of interpersonal influence as it may affect believers in a home fellowship who prayerfully trust God in spiritual warfare:

When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army...He shall say: ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them.’ Then the officers shall add, ‘Is any man afraid or faint-hearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too’ (Deuteronomy 20:2,3,8).

The Bible teaches that right relationships can spur believers on to greater love, courage, and service for the Lord. Wrong relationships can deter His people from the valor and courage required to accomplish His purposes through them. Load-bearing in a home fellowship enables Christians to support each other in a personal way so that they can carry out God’s purposes. Courage and valor are as highly esteemed in the Bible as they are in Israel today. The Israeli military leaders of today are the ones whose wisdom and courage have won previous battles as they *led*, not sent, their men into the fray.

Consider how biblical men of courage attracted one another. 1 Samuel 14 illustrates Jonathan’s courage for the Lord at Micmash: *“Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, ‘Come, let’s go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few”* (1 Samuel 14:6). The same courageous regard for God’s honor is displayed by David against Goliath: *“David said to the Philistine, ‘You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied”* (1 Samuel 17:45).

From the time they first met, these two valiant men were drawn to each other: *“And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself”* (1 Samuel 20:17). Their courage produced a wonderful devotion that was eulogized by David: *“I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women”* (1 Samuel 1:26).

People who are courageous for God attract other courageous people to themselves. The prophet Samuel describes the “men of valor” who joined David:

These are the names of David’s mighty men: Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahkemonite, was chief of the Three; he raised his spear against eight hundred men, whom he killed in one encounter. Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one

of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, but he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead. Next to him was Shammah son of Agee the Hararite. When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field full of lentils, Israel's troops fled from them (2 Samuel 23:8-12).

These three were joined by thirty other mighty men who also embodied courage beyond the average. Who are the ones in your life whom you can count on to come alongside you to stand firm in God's mighty power when trials and spiritual battles assail you?

Consider the home fellowship of today in light of the early Church: Righteousness produces boldness. Think of the importance of courage. Valiant people attract other people of courage. Do you believe that your close relationships in the faith reflect you? If you do, look honestly at yourself and those to whom you are close. Do they exhibit the abiding presence of Jesus? Is He producing His fruit through each of you? (Ponder the vine and branches relationship of John 15:1-17). The writer to the Hebrews described the importance of courage and encouragement to keep Christ-followers from sin's trap:

*But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we **hold on to our courage** and the hope of which we boast. See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But **encourage one another daily**, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (Hebrews 3:6,12-14, emphasis added).*

As you find yourself being pressured more and more by the ever-evolving standards of the world system, prayerfully immerse yourself in God's Word. Beseech Him to fill you with "all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (see Colossians 1:9). The Israelites of Jeremiah's time succumbed to the lure of deception and worldly gratification. Heed God's warning to them: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the **ancient paths**, ask where the **good way** is, and **walk in it**, and you will find **rest for your souls**" (Jeremiah 6:16, emphasis added). Does God's rest mean that your circumstances will improve, your trials subside, your temptations cease? Probably not, but your *soul*, your arena of emotional and decisional response, will find rest in the midst of the turmoil. God's "ancient paths" call for righteousness and trust. Let us spur each other on to walk in them.